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SUBJECT: MALI'S REALITY: WHAT MOTIVATES ATT?

Classified By: Ambassador Gillian E. Milovanovic,
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S/NF) Summary: This is the first of two messages addressing the role of the Government of Mali with regard to the ongoing hostage crisis in the north and the more general presence of Al Qaeda linked terrorists in parts of northern Mali. This cable, intended as a guide to interpreting and foreseeing GOM behavior, attempts to situate GOM interests and concerns in the context of the very real material and security challenges it faces. Our second message will address international proposals with regard to hostage and terrorism problems in Mali, specifically focusing on how the design and implementation of these proposals will, in the aftermath, affect our bilateral relationship and northern security. It will also set out what we see as essential USG actions once these proposals are carried out. End Summary.

¶2. (S/NF) The recent hostage crises in northern Mali and the ongoing, if recently more assertive, presence of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), cast a bright light on Government of Mali (GOM) actions, inactions, and views about the variety of security threats in Mali's vast north. As the USG policy and analysis communities examine the confluence of these difficult situations in the complex Sahel, it is natural to examine GOM performance and attempt to deduce from it the motivations that may explain and predict behavior.

¶3. (S/NF) Our sense of urgency in reaching solutions is heightened by the current hostage crisis. Unfortunately, the hostage process is also responsible for generating the appearance of both connected and not-so-connected individuals of assorted nationalities who have strong interests in inserting themselves as negotiators or informants into a situation that they hope will bring them at least favor and at most financial reward. Any number of various red herrings and allegations will inevitably surface from those looking to bolster their claims to be negotiators, insiders, or seeking otherwise to join the action as the hostage process unfolds. Weighing the bona fides of various sources and claims is a challenge for all of us in any of the analytical communities working on the hostage/terrorism issue.

¶4. (S/NF) In addition, we believe a clear understanding of the resource, capacity, political, and security realities facing Mali is essential to evaluating the why of recent and future GOM assessments actions and decisions. We have seen a few recent instances in which unsubstantiated sole source allegations or analytical conjecture has been recycled as fact. Such fact has in turn been cited as proof of Malian complicity with terrorists, specifically to support the assertion that Mali and AQIM have concluded a formal mutual non-aggression agreement.

¶5. (S/NF) While we don't claim 20/20 vision, we find that allegation dubious. More to the point, agreement does not necessarily imply) as seems to be asserted-- being expressly in league for money or ideology. It can also mean acknowledging the reality of one's military weakness and inability to take action, and trying de facto to make the

best of a weak hand. Indeed , our general view is that there is no deliberate collusion by the GOM in order to accommodate AQIM.

16. (S/NF) What very definitely exists is an (accurate) realization on the part of the GOM that they are not in a position to act unilaterally against infringement on their territory, and a concern about the implications of foreign actors doing so, since the Malians also lack the capacity to protect their citizens, and their armed forces, from reprisals by AQIM. Despite our active calendar of important and valuable bilateral military training, the Malian military is underequipped, and operates at a limited, inadequate, and very basic level. While GOM leadership and the national spirit is willing, making Mali an efficient partner in counter-terrorism is a decidedly long-term effort. As we look at Mali,s performance and its leadership,s actions we must keep that reality in mind and guard against concluding that the Malians have the capacity and wherewithal to act and are simply deciding for evil reasons not to do so.

17. (S/NF) Only a couple of months ago a military base was overrun by rebel Tuaregs and some 30 Malian soldiers killed. The attack came also unusually close to towns not previously threatened by Tuareg incursions. This sort of event, and the army,s inability even to defend itself, must be ever-present in the mind of the president ATT and his military leadership. Additionally, ATT, Mali,s democratically elected president, takes very seriously his responsibility to fulfill his and the government,s constitutional obligation to improve delivery of services to the citizens, as well as his obligations to place a high priority on their safety and defense.

18. (S/NF) ATT has made clear on various occasions in the recent past that his first concern is the safety and security of his people, which means obtaining the equipment and training for his armed forces to ensure that progressively they become less of a soft underbelly exposed to attack by rebels or AQIM and more of a defensive rampart in case they or civilians are attacked. He is painfully aware that, a couple of militia-driven successes against Tuareg rebel Bahanga aside, his forces are still far from his goal.

19. (S/NF) If, heaven forbid, a US president ever had to face a challenge equivalent to that posed by AQIM in Mali,s remote north, relying on a defense force such as Mali,s, in as challenging a physical environment as there is here, such a misfortunate US president would fare little better than the GOM in its current situation. Our hypothetical US president would be focused not on seeking out the threat but on defenses for his army and his civilians in case of attack or retaliation. He might reasonably cooperate with regional partners towards mutual security goals, and even seek resources from other countries to rebuild capacity and support the shared anti-terrorist effort, but he,d be unlikely to engage in, or approve actions, likely to result in retaliation against to his citizens for whom he could provide no defenses.

110. (S/NF) What does this mean to us? It means that we and the Malians together need to focus more and systematize more what we are doing, especially in securiry/count-terrorism assistance, development,and training. It has been very encouraging to ee the work and the analysis and conclusions of sveral of the training/exercises teams that have ben here in the last few months, teams that see th same needs and the same potential for improvemet that we see, and who are putting together their proposals. While we are working on that, it remains important not to find ourselves pushed, at this delicate time of hostage crisis, by the more cynical and often superficial interpretations of GOM motives. The reality as we see it is that the biggest cause of Malian action or inaction, the biggest limitation to their choices, is their very accurate understanding of their limited capacity.

111. (S/NF) Septel will focus on the implications of this

context for the design of proposals related to western hostages, and how to respond in our bilateral relationship to resulting security concerns for Mali.

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